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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the area of student participation, this paper considers the findings of a research project conducted by a team at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean, and funded by the New South Wales Department of School Education. The project was broadly focused on investigating the dynamics of communication within the school communities of comprehensive high schools. Data were drawn initially from nine comprehensive high schools in western Sydney. A total of 2,713 students drawn from Years 9 and 11 (generally 14-17 year olds), 232 teachers, 622 parents, and 44 business representatives participated in this phase of the project. Three case studies were then selected from this initial sample for further study. Data confirmed many well-documented negative student attitudes toward secondary schooling. It also found that efforts to involve students in school decision making through student government were not understood or appreciated by teachers and students. Interestingly, however, the data also indicated a surprising degree of congruence between student and teacher attitudes on a range of issues pertaining to secondary education. Neither students nor teachers seemed to appreciate this congruence. Essentially this study focused on the processes through which schools engage in building an ethos and the means used to communicate among staff, students, parents, and the wider community. Implications are drawn from the data, and improvements in school initiatives in student participation are suggested. (Author/KDP)

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Achieving meaningful student participation: The implications of research into secondary schools in New South Wales.

A Paper Presented to the Australian Council for Educational Administration and the Australian Secondary Principals Association National Conference: "Devolution, Democracy, Equity".

Adelaide, 26-30 September, 1993.

by

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Abstract

Focusing on the area of student participation, this paper considers the findings of a research project conducted by a team at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean, and funded by the NSW Department of School Education.

Data were drawn initially from nine comprehensive high schools in western Sydney. Three case studies were then selected from this initial sample for further study.

Data confirmed many well documented negative student attitudes to secondary schooling. It also found that efforts to involve students in school decision making through student government were not understood or appreciated by teachers and students. Interestingly however, the data also indicated a surprising degree of congruence between student and teacher attitudes on a range of issues pertaining to secondary education. Neither students nor teachers seemed to appreciate this congruence.

Implications are drawn from the data, and improvements in school initiatives in student participation are suggested.

This paper reports the results of a project conducted by researchers from the University of Western Sydney, Nepean, and education professionals centred in the Metropolitan West Region of Sydney. The project was funded by the NSW Department of School Education as part of its ongoing research initiative, and was conducted over an 18 month period between 1990 and 1992.

The project was broadly focused on investigating the dynamics of communication within the school communities of comprehensive high schools. Recent changes in the organisation of secondary education in NSW have seen the diversification of secondary schools, giving rise to specific purpose high schools such as Technology high schools, Sport and Physical Education high schools, Senior high schools, and an expansion in the number of Selective high schools. The comprehensive high school, the cornerstone of secondary education in NSW for 30 years, is now under some pressure in this new competitive environment. These schools are faced with the task of articulating the value of their educational product to a public which has a new range of educational alternatives, and which has been subjected to years of often adverse media publicity about the quality of public comprehensive high school education.

Essentially this study focused on the processes through which schools engage in building an ethos and the means used to communicate among staff, students, parents and the wider community. In researching these processes, the study firstly investigated what views were held by teachers, students, parents and business groups concerning the purposes and practices of comprehensive high schools. Case studies then explored the communication relationships and strategies employed by particular high schools under study. The study

provided data on the attitudes of the four participant groups towards secondary schools, and illustrated in particular that while there are areas of tension between secondary school teachers and their students, there are also significant areas where values are shared. It is aspects of these findings that are explored in this paper.

THE CONDUCT OF THE STUDY

The research was conducted in two stages. In Stage 1 members of 9 comprehensive high school communities (students, teachers, parents and business representatives) were questioned concerning their expectations of secondary schooling and the extent to which these expectations were realised by their comprehensive high schools. A total of 2 713 students drawn from Years 9 and 11 (generally 14-17 year olds), 232 teachers, 622 parents and 44 business representatives participated in this phase of the project. Both qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed in Stage 1.

In Stage 2 of the project three participating high schools were selected for more extensive case study research. In this Stage qualitative techniques such as individual and group interviews of staff and students, interviews of parents, participant researcher observation and artefact collection were employed to develop a more refined understanding of the perceptions members of the school community had of their schools, and the place that school communication processes seemed to have in the development of these perceptions.

A full account of the structure of the study and the research and data analysis methods employed can be found in the three volume report detailing the study (see Cairney, Hayward-Brown, Craigie, Dinham, Jaffe, Khamis, Nolan, Richards and Wilson, 1992).

While the study itself generated data on many aspects of secondary schools and school culture, this paper reports on data pertinent to the issue of student perceptions of secondary schooling and student participation in school decision making through student government.

LITERATURE RELATING TO THE STUDY

The literature on expectations and attitudes to secondary education establishes a consistent theme concerning the perceptions that students, teachers and parents have about the purposes and practices of secondary schooling. This theme is that academic achievement is seen by all groups as an important outcome of schooling (Beare and Milliken, 1988, cited in Schools Council, 1990; Collins and Hughes, 1982; Walton and Hill, 1987). In terms of their teaching of traditional academic subjects, most groups see schools as successfully undertaking this task; indeed some see it as having too much emphasis. On the other hand,

school outcomes such as the achievement of student self esteem and tolerance towards others are not seen to be addressed adequately by secondary schools.

Raven (1984, cited in Schools Council, 1990), found that both students and teachers see a primary goal of education as the fostering of student self confidence, but that both groups feel that such personal development outcomes are being neglected and poorly attained. Nonetheless, students seem to value those informal school mechanisms which foster personal goals, and they especially value teachers who act positively towards students. Collins and Hughes (1982) review an array of research which supports the premise that more attention needs to be paid to 'care of students' in schools. They cite a study by Fawn and Teese (1980), conducted in three Australian states and territories, which indicated that students strongly value teachers who listen and show concern. Interestingly, Wright and Headlam's (1976) study, though dated, was later supported by findings from Walton and Hill (1987). These studies found that students tend to value the achievement of academic rather than social and other goals because they lead to employment and other pragmatic outcomes. So there is, in the view of students, something of a complex and subtle view of secondary schools. They appear to value schools' academic goals, and see their importance, but would prefer the social goals to be more heavily emphasised.

The literature on student government and decision making suggests that active student participation in schooling, particularly at the level of school decision making, contributes not only to positive school climate but also to experiential learning of democratic procedures. Through effective participation in student government - that is, participation which rests upon democratic principles and processes, students not only assist in improving schools, but also are better informed with the skills and understandings necessary to participate in life in liberal-democratic societies (Dewey, 1916 ; Holdsworth, 1988; Jensen and Walker, 1989; Pearl, 1988; Nayano-Taylor, 1987).

Student involvement in decision making has positive outcomes for both students and their schools. Greenburg (1987) points to the example of Sudbury Valley School, Massachusetts, where a student government operates which extensively involves the broad student population in making decisions. Greenburg suggests the outcomes are a well ordered school, personal freedom for students, virtually no vandalism and little in the way of destructive activity. Weintraub (1984) points to the development of a strong sense of ownership of a school by students, teachers and parents, with more effective educational programs as a result, when students are involved in educational decision making. Nayano-Taylor (1987) suggests a variety of positive outcomes following the establishment of effective student representative councils in schools: high morale, commitment to the

organisation and its values, improved quality of decision making, reduced absenteeism and increased productivity and learning.

Despite this, where student representative councils or other equivalent student organisations do exist in secondary schools, they are often seen as failing to encourage students to participate meaningfully in school decision making processes. Pearl (1988) refers to the trivialising of the SRC, and suggests that many SRCs are seen by the general student body as elite groups of students who are not accountable to the students themselves. Similarly, Nayano-Taylor (1987) and Holdsworth (1988) point to the dangers of token student involvement in decision making, which often leads to students feeling frustrated and disempowered. Nayano-Taylor (1987) found one student council being asked by the school principal to prepare refreshments for visiting dignitaries and to run school dances. It was only when these students began to *invite* the principal and other teachers to meetings (previously, they had simply turned up), and when they began to decline the invitations to prepare afternoon teas that these students began to take themselves seriously as potential decision makers. Interestingly, when the *students* began to do this, the school executive began to take the SRC seriously too.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Student perceptions of secondary schooling (Stage 1 data)

Stage 1 of this study used a quantitative questionnaire with provision for qualitative responses to generate data about participants' perceptions of the importance of various curriculum subjects, the purposes of education, the nature of the school environment, and the nature of school organisational and teaching practices. Using a 5 point Lickert scale, participants were asked whether high schools **should** emphasise various curriculum elements, outcomes and organisational features. They were also asked the extent to which their school **does** emphasise these things.

Responses to these items were analysed using the Quadrant Assessment Model (Paddock, McCleary and Miller, 1979). This model involves ranking the means for all the 'should' items from highest to lowest. The 'does' items are then ranked in a similar way. A mid point for all the 'should' and 'does' ranked means is adopted as the cutoff point. All the statements in the top half are considered as 'high/should' and 'high/does', and below the middle rank as 'low/should' and 'low/does'. This enables researchers to establish not only which aspects of school life participants feel are positive or negative, but also participants' perceptions of the extent to which these aspects are receiving emphasis in their schools.

Table 1: Comparison of student and teacher perceptions of school purpose and effectiveness

(**Stud** = students agree; n=2 713) (**Teach** = teachers agree; n=232)

	Positive perceptions of school		Negative perceptions of school	
SCHOOL FUNCTION OR PURPOSE	My school **should** emphasise this, and **does**	My school **shouldn't** emphasise this, and **doesn't**	My school **should** emphasise this, and **doesn't**	My school **shouldn't** emphasise this, and **does**
SCHOOL SUBJECTS				
English	Stud √ Teach √			
Mathematics	Stud √ Teach √			
Science	Stud √ Teach √			
Social Science	Stud √ Teach √			
Art, Music, Drama	Stud √ Teach √			
Physical Education	Stud √ Teach √			
Wood and metal technology	Stud √ Teach √			
Computing	Stud √ Teach √			
Textiles/Home Economics	Teach √			Stud √
Business Studies			Stud √ Teach √	
Foreign Languages		Stud √	Teach √	
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT				
Maintaining self esteem	Teach √		Stud √	
" self discipline			Stud √ Teach √	
Encouraging good manners			Stud √ Teach √	
" acceptance of others			Stud √ Teach √	
PREP. FOR LIFE/WORK				
Knowledge/political system		Stud √	Teach √	
" Australian society	Teach √		Stud √	
" Environmental issues	Teach √		Stud √	
Knowledge/Home management			Stud √ Teach √	
" Budgeting, form-filling			Stud √ Teach √	
Awareness/ career options	Stud √ Teach √			
Help in choosing career	Teach √		Stud √	
Knowledge/world of work			Stud √ Teach √	
Developing job skills			Stud √ Teach √	
PASTORAL CARE				
Caring school environment	Teach √		Stud √	
Student decision making	Teach √		Stud √	
Requiring school uniform	Teach √			Stud √
Help students in trouble	Teach √		Stud √	
Friendly teachers	Teach √		Stud √	
SCHOOL ORGANISATION				
Streaming/ability grading	Stud √ Teach √			
Providing excursions	Teach √		Stud √	
Extra-curricular activities	Stud √ Teach √			
Frequent examinations		Stud √		Teach √
COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT				
Community decision making		Stud √ Teach √		
Maintaining business links			Stud √ Teach √	
After hours use of school			Stud √ Teach √	
Participation in ed activties		Stud √	Teach √	
Keeping parents informed	Stud √ Teach √			
Contact with Primary school		Stud √	Teach √	

Table 1 provides a synopsis of both student and teacher perceptions of school effectiveness which result from Quadrant Assessment analysis of the quantitative data in Stage 1 of this study. Table 1 groups the items to which participants responded into perceptions about *school subjects*, the role of the school in providing *personal development, preparation for life and work*, and *pastoral care* for students, items concerning *school organisation*, and those concerning *community involvement* in secondary schools.

An examination of Table 1 indicates interesting trends in both student and teacher perceptions of schooling, and in the relativities between student and teacher perceptions. It is not the purpose of this paper to explore the implications of responses to each item. Nonetheless, some significant results are noted below.

Perceptions of school subjects

Generally, it is apparent that both students and teachers see the subjects they are studying and teaching as important and being accorded importance in their schools. It is surprising that subjects such as computing are regarded as having sufficient emphasis, and interesting that both groups perceive business studies as lacking sufficient emphasis.

Personal development

This is an area in which both students and teachers see their schools as relatively unsuccessful. While teachers feel that sufficient emphasis is being accorded to the maintenance of student self esteem, it is apparent students either don't recognise or appreciate these efforts. Strategies relating to students' self regulation and behaviour are seen to be lacking by both groups.

Preparation for life and work

Generally, schools are seen as not doing enough in this area. This is especially the perception of students. However, it is surprising the extent to which teachers agree with student perceptions, especially about the need for students to learn home management and life skills. It is also interesting that students have an ambivalent attitude to the study of Australian politics.

Pastoral care

This is where the sharpest division in the perceptions of students and teachers occurs. Teachers agree that each of these items is important, but feel that schools are sufficiently emphasising these areas. Students, on the other hand, feel that schools are deficient in responding to their pastoral needs.

School organisation

Surprising here is the agreement amongst students and teachers on the issue of streaming or ability grouping. Schools are seen to be performing well in grouping students and in the provision of extra curricular activities. An interesting outcome is the different perceptions students and teachers have about exams, both groups feeling that exams should not be emphasized, but teachers feeling that they are emphasized and students feeling that they are not.

Community involvement

Students and teachers agreed about 4 of the 6 items in this group. An interesting aspect of these responses is the shared ambivalence about community involvement in school decision-making. Despite consistent governmental efforts in NSW over a number of years to increase commitment to this form of community participation, on the basis of this study it seems that school communities are not necessarily convinced such participation is desirable. Parent responses also indicated a 'low should/low does' response to this item.

It is interesting that students are less committed to outside involvement in the school than are teachers, with students more resistant to community involvement in educational activities, and to maintaining close links with feeder primary schools. On the other hand, it is interesting that teachers support the increased after-hours use of school facilities and also support school-business links.

The relative perceptions of students and teachers

Of the 39 items in Table 1, it is significant that mean student and teacher perceptions, as measured on the Quadrant Assessment analysis, were identical in 23 cases. In other words, it is common for students and teachers to agree upon things that secondary schools are doing well or are not doing well.

This confirms findings by Collins and Hughes (1982) and Walton and Hill (1987) that students and teachers tend to share values concerning the importance of traditional academic subjects and of personal/social goals as an outcome of secondary education. Nonetheless, we would suggest that the level of convergence of teacher and student views about school performance evident in this study is surprising, and has real implications for the conduct of student government and other participation initiatives at the secondary school level.

This study also confirms previous findings indicating that students are unhappy with aspects of pastoral care in secondary schools. In particular student views of the school environment, student decision-making and the friendliness and caring of teachers were often found to be quite negative. In the qualitative data generated by Stage 1, students

tended to feel that the extent to which schools provide a caring environment depends very much upon the attitudes of the individual teachers with whom they have contact. The attitude that 'some teachers care, some don't' was prevalent, with a substantially higher percentage of student comments referring to uncaring teachers. Student comments which illustrate these attitudes included: *"Some teachers are nice and others don't want to have anything to do with you"*, and *"Teachers don't care about students any more. They just collect their pay and yell and don't help us at all"*.

Teachers, on the other hand, saw the need to care, but often felt they were in the difficult position of trying to be friendly in the face of student resistance. Some teacher comments illustrating teacher perceptions included: *"A class needs discipline and order, at the same time it is hard to be friendly in teaching when trying to maintain this order"; "I have often found the friendly teacher usually does not achieve much with the students - friendly but firm does"*, and *"Teachers should be approachable when help is needed, not friendly to the point of becoming door mats"*.

The issue of what constitutes good pastoral care practices for schools is obviously a critical one. To students, having good relations with teachers is important, even central, to their schooling experience. It was very common to find student reflections about teachers' conduct of interpersonal relations, in student comments about teaching, learning and the achievement of social goals. For example one student wrote, *"How can the students treat each other the same and accept each other when the teachers don't accept some of the students?"* Perhaps the final word on this perceived 'gap' students feel they have with many of their teachers should go to two comments, the first from a student, the second from a parent: *"I think we should have better communication with our teachers"* ; *"All teachers should be aware of their students and the students should be able to talk to them and help them to understand"*.

Below, this paper explores the implications of Stage 2 data for student participation in decision making. However, the data from Stage 1 presented in Table 1 also have implications for student participation, and these are noted briefly here. The significance of these data is twofold. Firstly, it indicates that while students and teachers share many of the same concerns, there is a communication 'gap' between students and teachers which is in urgent need of bridging. Somehow, schools need to encourage strategies which will reduce some of the confrontationist tones evidenced in these data so they can be replaced with more understanding and cooperative sentiment.

Secondly, the data indicate that there is a strong basis of shared values already existent amongst teachers and students. Students and teachers often agree about how secondary schools are doing a good job, and where schools need to improve. It therefore seems to us that the commonly held view that students ought not be involved in school decision making because of the immaturity of their views or their incapacity to appreciate the work of the school is questionable. There is ample evidence here that students do appreciate both the nature and purpose of secondary schooling. On the basis of these data, it is our view that students have much to contribute in making decisions about school life. Indeed, while students have such negative views as those explored earlier, we would argue that it is critical that students begin to meaningfully participate in making such decisions. At the present time, while schools generally have in place some form of student organisation (Student Representative Councils, for example) which ostensibly allow students to contribute to decision making, there is doubt about the effectiveness of these organisations in facilitating this level of student participation. This paper now explores the data on student councils generated by our study, and examines their implications for school action.

Student perceptions of student participation and government (Stage 2 data)

Stage 2 of the research treated three of the original nine schools as sites for case studies. Themes apparent in Stage 1 were researched in more depth in Stage 2 through interviews with teachers, students and parents. One of the major themes to emerge from interviews was school communication. All responses received in interviews concerning communication were categorized into either *Verbal, Written*, or *Organizational* forms of communication. Comments relating to the SRC were placed into the Organizational category. The three depth studies were wide ranging in their investigations of aspects of school communication and related issues, with the area of the SRC being but one of many areas investigated. The information on SRCs is therefore far from complete, but provides a useful basis for further investigations. The total number of responses, the number and percentages of responses concerning the SRC and the proportion of positive and negative responses concerning the SRC are outlined in Table 2 .

Table 2
Number and percentage of Positive and Negative comments relating to the *SRC* from within the Organizational Category

SCHOOL	STUDENTS		TEACHERS		PARENTS	
	Total number of comments	% of total	Total number of comments	% of total	Total number of comments	% of total
SCHOOL 1						
Total Organisational	74	100%	103	100%	53	100%
Total SRC	58	78%	4	4%	0	0%
SRC positive	7	12%	1	25%	0	0%
SRC negative	51	88%	3	75%	0	0%
SCHOOL 2						
Total Organisational	118	100%	38	100%	3	100%
Total SRC	64	54%	1	3%	0	0%
SRC positive	23	36%	1	100%	0	0%
SRC negative	41	64%	0	0%	0	0%
SCHOOL 3						
Total Organisational	116	100%	54	100%	0	0%
Total SRC	47	41%	9	17%	0	0%
SRC positive	9	29%	7	78%	0	0%
SRC negative	38	81%	2	22%	0	0%

School 1

The SRC at school 1 seemed to have a very low profile and both students and staff were confused about its role. Comments about the SRC represented the highest frequency of total comments about school organization, and by far the greatest number of these came from students, with occasional comments from teachers and none from parents. Eighty-eight per cent of student comments were negative. The large negative response suggested that the purpose of the organization had not been effectively communicated within the school and the student body as a whole did not see the SRC as an effective means of involving students in decision making. Student comments expressing this sentiment included:

"The SRC don't do anything"; "Nobody cares about the SRC";
"You don't hear the results of SRC meetings", and
"The SRC says it will do something but then it doesn't".

Interestingly , student opinion in this school was sought via means other than through the SRC. For example, surveys about subject choice and timetabling were instigated and analysed by the Key Learning Areas Committee, and student debates were held about issues such as uniform. Also it was noted that there was a high level of student contact with the senior executive at school 1. The captains of the school seemed 'very at home' in the Principal's office and many students were continually 'ducking in and out' for a variety of reasons. The Principal also maintained a high level of contact with students who were

misbehaving. These students had to present behaviour forms to be personally signed by him on a regular basis. This gave him an opportunity to maintain a high level of personal contact with them. The Principal made a point of attending some Year assemblies and made personal contact with students to whom he felt the need to speak .

However, the findings concerning the SRC in School 1 strongly suggest that students perceived it as a facilitative organization for teachers and an elite group of students, rather than a participatory body.

School 2

Once again comments about the SRC came almost exclusively from students, with the majority of comments being negative. The fact that the mechanisms of the SRC seemed more generally understood at school 2 than at school 1, and that the mechanisms seemed more representative of the student body, coincided with a still substantially negative reaction from students. The strong opinion of students was that although student opinion was able to be aired through the SRC it lacked any serious influence. Student comments included:

"The SRC does not represent our views";
"I haven't heard of the SRC doing things";
"The SRC doesn't really do much", and
"We don't see the outcome of what the SRC do".

Students referred to a lack of teacher interest in the SRC, suggesting that the loss of one teacher had meant that the role of the SRC had declined. There were fewer non-SRC avenues for seeking student opinion at school 2 than at the other two schools.

School 3

The response to the SRC at school 3 is perplexing, as although the SRC had a high profile in school policies, it received negative student comment similar to school 1. The school had spent considerable time and effort setting up its SRC and Leadership programs, all connected to the School House and Welfare system, and the school had a well established reputation in the wider education system regarding these matters. Teacher comment about the SRC was greater in magnitude and more positive than in the other two schools, which could be explained by its higher profile and significent teacher involvement. The high teacher involvement in the running of the SRC, the domination of student involvement by year 11 and 12 students, and the very hierarchical means of approaching the SRC could partly explain the negative student comment. Outside year 11 and 12, students felt that they did not understand how the SRC worked, and/or that it was irrelevant to them. Negative student comments included:

"Students don't have enough say through the SRC";

"There is no feedback on what the SRC is doing";
"I don't know about the SRC", and
"The SRC should have a bulletin because no one knows about it."

The principal at school 3 seemed to espouse a general policy of concentrating energy on the 'interested minority' as opposed to the 'apathetic majority' in matters of husbanding community and student leadership in school matters. Newsletters, of both student and executive origin were perceived by students as more effective channels of communication than the SRC, though not as means of influencing policy.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In all schools in this study, students perceived a high degree of powerlessness while desiring greater involvement in matters relating to their welfare. Interestingly, this was not matched by a desire on the part of students for wider community involvement in matters of school decision making. In fact they were strongly opposed to bodies such as P and C's or School Councils increasing their power. Juxtaposed with these feelings was the student desire for a caring school environment and friendly teachers. As already indicated, however, there were significant areas of congruence among teachers, students and the community as to what schools were doing, but little appreciation of this congruence. It seems that little time was given for meaningful exchange of views among members of these school communities. This could be substantially because those with the power in schools don't see such opportunities as being very useful. Significantly, both students and teachers seemed frustrated by their lack of ability to influence school change (see Dinham, Cairney, Craigie and Wilson, 1993). Student Representative Councils were perceived by the wider student community to be misunderstood and largely irrelevant to student welfare, or as vehicles for meaningful student involvement in school government.

In seeking to make recommendations concerning student participation, particularly through Student Represemtative Councils, it seems that changes are more likely to have maximum effect if made in a context of more general improvements to school communication and decision making. The evidence suggests strongly that both teachers and students feel powerless, that students and teachers do not appreciate the degree of their shared values regarding schooling, and that there is an unhealthy amount of tension between students and teachers. Modifications in methods of student input to decision making therefore seem to be suggested in concert with wider changes. This study suggests that there is a need to:

- communicate academic goals more clearly with students and parents (targeted efforts are needed for non-English speaking parents);
- institutionalize forums for debate among staff, students and parents about the qualities that the school seeks;
- increase student and teacher negotiation in relation to aspects of subjects taught ;
- monitor student, teacher and parent perceptions of subjects and school ethos.
- consistently use local media to communicate school aspirations and achievements;

Such strategies are likely to result in the development of a greater sense of community and 'intimacy', despite large school numbers and a diverse school community.

It is not surprising that students wanted more input into decision making. It was interesting that all groups agreed that student input was important, but noticeable that differences occurred in perceptions concerning how this was occurring and whether change was needed. Students were pessismistic about the likelihood of greater involvement, while teachers saw no room for increased effort in this area. Most schools utilize SRCs, but many students, particularly junior students, see them as serving only a select group of students. There is also student and teacher confusion about election and procedural policies, so it is not surprising that student apathy often leads to volunteer rather that elected membership. This leads to suggestions that they were involved out of 'self interest' rather than 'school interest'. Students want their opinions to be heard and valued, while complaining of token representation on the SRC committees .

The important point is that SRCs can be seen as serious elements in efficient school government, and not simply token exercises. In addition, in a liberal democratic society, where rational processing of alternative courses of action is the expected societal procedure for enfranchised citizens, it seems that schools should be seriously preparing students for this involvement, and that this will be greatly enhanced by secondary students using SRCs to further rational debate and influence school policy making. The study therefore suggests the following, concerning student involvement in school decision making:

- clearer guidelines on the power of the SRC;
- increased SRC involvement in a wider range of important school matters;
- better communication about election of representatives and the way in which representatives can represent a broad range of student interests;
- better communication about organisational details - how, when and where the SRC is run;
- greater guidance in matters relating to procedures of meetings, to enhance confidence of members when sitting on teacher committees;
- the nature of non-student (teacher/parent) involvement in theSRC to be determined by the SRC;
- reassurance by teachers that student views are valued and have been taken into consideration, usually through meaningful negotiation and action;
- better communication to students, teachers and parents about the achievements of the SRC;
- other regular broad forums for expressing student opinion (eg debates, questionnaires).

As noted earlier, the notion of student participation in school government was one of many areas investigated in the wide ranging study of communication in comprehensive high schools in which the authors of this paper participated. Further indepth investigations in the area of student government are required to throw additional light on such crucial aspects as the nature of the apparent congruence between student and teacher opinion regarding secondary schooling, student and teacher views as to in what circumstances bodies such as SRCs should participate, and ideals as opposed to pragmatic possibilities in the area of student government.

Communication in comprehensive high schools must however, involve more than the one-way transmission of information if schools are to develop a healthy shared ethos, and if they are to run efficiently and prepare students for participation in a liberal-democratic society. Overall, effective productive communication depends to a large extent on a common frame of reference among the communicators. Students need to share in the development of this common frame of reference, and see that their views when rationally processed are part of school decision making.

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